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THE **BRIDGE** **OF VERANO**



No. 23.—CLEAR FOR ACTION

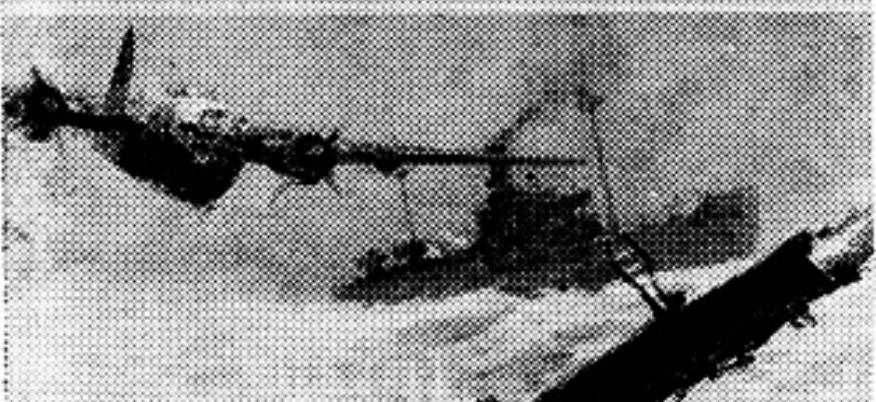
On the hell-run to Russia, under constant savage air and sea attack, was no time to learn to take an order—nor to give one.

No. 24.—FLIGHT DECK

To the carrier's crew, the flight deck was the front line and although their battle would never end, glory passed them by.



CLEAR FOR ACTION



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FLIGHT DECK



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The Bridge of Verano



FOR TWO CENTURIES, THE STONE BRIDGE AT VERANO HAD KNOWN ONLY THE PEACEFUL TREAD OF THE ITALIAN PEASANTS. THEN, IN THE EARLY SPRING OF 1944, IT TREMBLED TO THE JARRING TRAMP OF IRON SHOD JACKBOOTS. FOR TEN DAYS, THE BRIDGE BECAME A VITAL LINK IN THE LINE OF COMMUNICATION OF THE GERMAN ARMY.

Chapter 1. *The Bridge*

A LONG COLUMN OF TIRED MEN MOVED SLOWLY ALONG THE ROUGH ITALIAN ROADS. THEIR FIELD GREY UNIFORMS WERE STAINED WITH WINTER MUD. THE ONCE ARROGANT ARMIES OF THE THIRD REICH WERE IN RETREAT.



BUT THE GERMAN ARMY WAS FAR FROM ROUTED. HARD-BITTEN INFANTRY UNITS COVERED THE WITHDRAWAL, BITTERLY CONTESTING EVERY YARD OF GROUND.



The Bridge of Verano

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FROM DEEP DUG POSITIONS, 88 mm. GUNS, THE STEEL FANGS OF THE GERMAN ARMY, HURLED DEFIADE AT THE ALLIED ADVANCE.

NO MAN
TAKES A STEP BACK.
WE FIGHT TO THE LAST
ROUND.

JAWOHL,
HERR HAUPTMANN.



EVERY MILE OF ITALIAN SOIL WAS WRESTED FROM THE NAZI GRASP WITH HIGH EXPLOSIVE AND COLD STEEL. EVERY FOOT WAS PAID FOR DEARLY WITH ALLIED BLOOD.

KEEP GOING,
MEN... KEEP
AT 'EM!



The Bridge of Verano

FOR THE VETERANS OF THE EIGHTH ARMY, IT WAS JUST ANOTHER MILE ON A LONG BITTER ROAD THAT HAD STARTED UNDER A BLAZING AFRICAN SUN.

WHAT'S TO DO WITH THESE 'ERE SUPERMEN, SARGE?

YOU AND SCOTT PUSH 'EM BACK TO H.Q. THEN GET BACK HERE SHARPISH — WE'RE MOVING ON AGAIN.



SOMEWHERE AHEAD, IN THE BLEAK MOUNTAINS, A GERMAN DIVISION WAS WRIGGLING TO EXTRICATE ITSELF FROM A FAST CLOSING TRAP.

JERRY IS ON THE RUN. IF MY GUESS IS RIGHT, THEIR REARGUARD WILL TRY TO STALL US IN THE MOUNTAINS, WHILE THE MAIN DIVISION PULLS BACK ACROSS THE RIVER. THERE, GENTLEMEN, IS THE KEY POSITION TO THE NEXT BATTLE.



THE BRIGADIER'S FINGER STABBED DOWN ON TO THE MAP ON A SPOT FIFTY MILES NORTH. THE BRIDGE AT VERANO.

The Bridge of Verano

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THERE WAS ANOTHER MAN WHO ALSO DWELT ON THE STRATEGIC POSSIBILITIES OF THAT SAME BRIDGE. MAJOR CARL DESSAUR, COMMANDER OF A COMPANY OF S.S. TROOPS, GAZED DOWN WITH SOME SATISFACTION ON THE STILL PEACEFUL VALLEY...

ACH! VERANO, OTTO —
AND THE BRIDGE. IT IS TIME
WE PAID THE DIVISIONAL
COMMANDER A VISIT.



ALL THAT DAY, AT THE GERMAN DIVISIONAL H.Q., THE DISTANT GUNS HAD RUMBLED MENACINGLY. IT WAS LATE IN THE AFTERNOON WHEN GENERAL ERNHART RECEIVED THE S.S. MAJOR.

MAJOR DESSAUR,
FROM GENERAL
HEADQUARTERS,
TO SEE YOU,
SIR.

HEIL HITLER!



The Bridge of Verano

MAJOR DESSAUR WASTED NO WORDS...

MY ORDERS ARE TO PLACE MY MEN AT YOUR DISPOSAL FOR SPECIAL SECURITY DUTIES, HERR GENERAL. I SUGGEST I CAN BE OF MOST ASSISTANCE BY TAKING OVER THE DEFENCE OF THE BRIDGE DURING THE WITHDRAWAL.

THE DIVISIONAL COMMANDER TOOK LITTLE PAINS TO CONCEAL HIS DISLIKE OF THE HARD-FACED MAN BEFORE HIM.

I WOULD REMIND YOU THAT I COMMAND THIS DIVISION. THE BRIDGE IS IN THE HANDS OF A MOST CAPABLE ENGINEER OFFICER. I SEE NO REASON...

THE MAJOR'S REPLY WAS QUIET BUT THERE WAS NO IGNORING THE THREAT IT CARRIED.

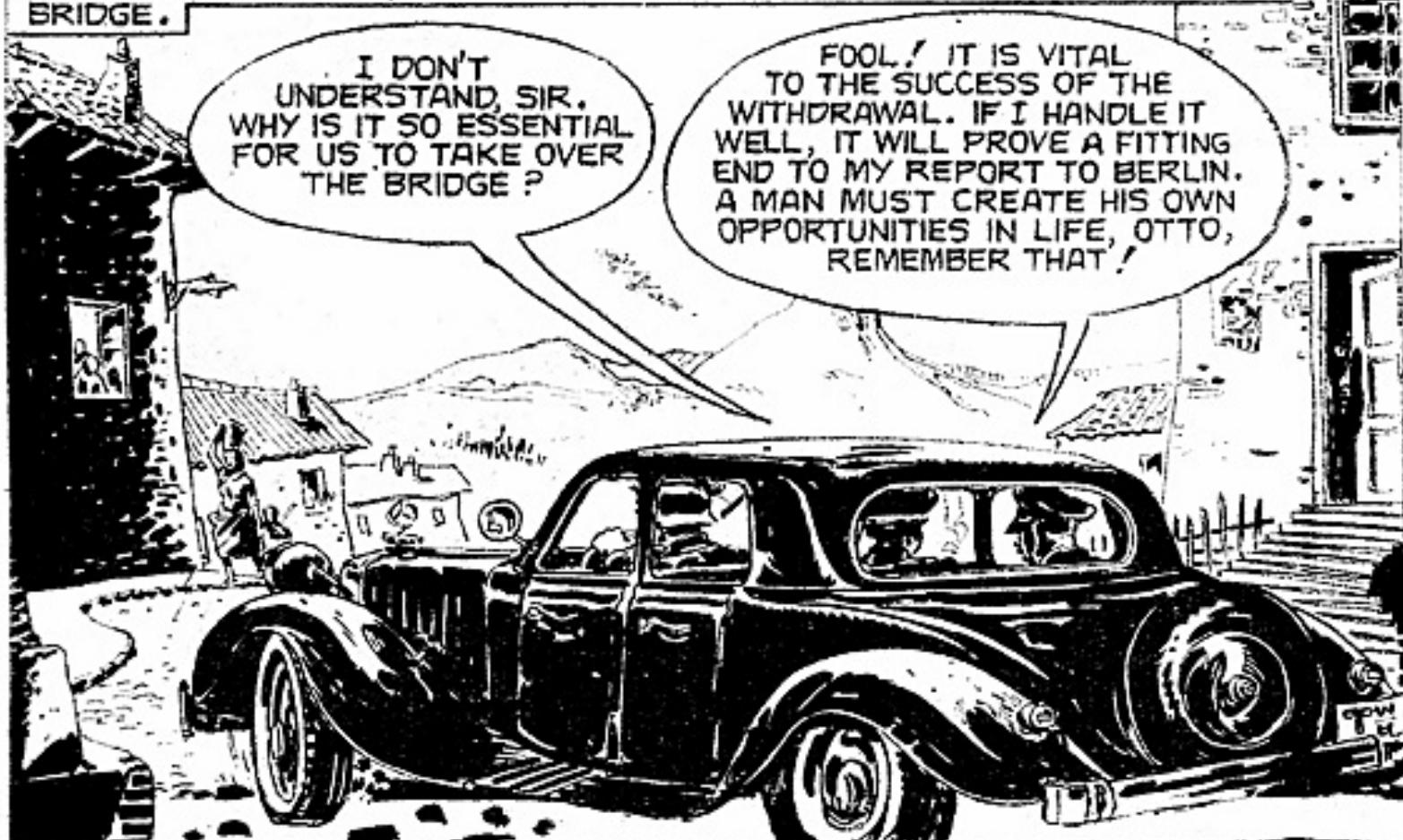
HERR GENERAL. I HAVE ORDERS TO REPORT DIRECTLY TO BERLIN UPON THE MORALE OF YOUR MEN. I HOPE I MAKE MYSELF CLEAR. AGAIN I WOULD SUGGEST, I TAKE COMMAND OF THE BRIDGE!

The Bridge of Verano

FOR A MOMENT, FURY BLAZED IN THE GENERAL'S EYES — THEN HE SHRUGGED...



TEN MINUTES LATER, THE BLACK STAFF CAR WAS RACING TOWARDS THE BRIDGE.



The Bridge of Verano

HAUPTMANN HANS GUTTERMAN WAS A WORRIED MAN FOR, AS AN ENGINEER, HE KNEW THAT THE OLD BRIDGE WAS NOT CONSTRUCTED TO WITHSTAND THE CONSTANT VIBRATION OF ARMOURED FIGHTING VEHICLES.



BLACK UNIFORMED S.S. MEN LEAPED FROM THE THREE LORRIES THAT HAD HALTED CLOSE BY...



The Bridge of Verano

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RESIGNEDLY, THE ENGINEER TOOK THE S.S. MAJOR TO LOOK AT THE BRIDGE.

IT'S THAT PIER THAT WORRIES ME,
HERR MAJOR. WITH THE RIVER SWOLLEN,
IT WON'T STAND THE STRAIN OF HEAVY
VEHICLES. IT MUST BE
STRENGTHENED.

WHEN I WANT YOUR
THEORIES I'LL ASK FOR THEM.
ALL YOU HAVE TO DO IS SEE
THAT THE BRIDGE IS MINED
READY FOR DEMOLITION.

DARKNESS CLOSED IN SWIFTLY, AND WITH IT CAME THE FIRST PANZER
REGIMENT TO CROSS THE RIVER. ONE BY ONE, THE GREAT STEEL JUGGERNAUTS
CLANKED ACROSS THE BRIDGE.



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THREE TROOPS OF TANKS RUMBLED SAFELY ACROSS. THEN A CONVULSIVE SHUDDER RAN THROUGH ITS WEATHERED STONES.



FRANTICALLY, A TANK COMMANDER SCREAMED ORDERS — BUT THEY CAME TOO LATE.



WITH A SICKENING LURCH, FORTY TONS OF ARMOURED MIGHT PLUNGED TO DESTRUCTION.

AAAAAGH!



A COLD SWEAT OF FEAR BROKE OUT ON MAJOR DESSAUR'S FACE AS HE GAZED AT THE WRECKED BRIDGE. THEN HE TURNED SAVAGELY ON THE WHITE-FACED ENGINEER BESIDE HIM.

DUMMKOPF! DO YOU REALISE WHAT YOU HAVE DONE!
NOTHING CAN CROSS THE BRIDGE.
THE DIVISION IS TRAPPED!

BUT, BUT...
I ...

HERR MAJOR,
YOU ARE WANTED
ON THE FIELD
TELEPHONE.



The Bridge of Verano

HIS FACE ASHEN GREY, THE MAJOR
BABBLED EXCUSES INTO THE PHONE.

IT WAS THAT BUNGLING FOOL
OF AN ENGINEER, HERR
GENERAL.
I ASSURE YOU,
THE BRIDGE
WILL BE OPEN
AGAIN BY
FIRST LIGHT.



IT HAD
BETTER BE,
MAJOR, OR YOU
WILL PAY
DEARLY
FOR IT.

EVEN THE BRUTAL S.S. GUARDS
COWERED BACK FROM THE BLIND
FURY OF THEIR LEADER ...

THAT BRIDGE WILL BE OPEN
AGAIN IN THE MORNING, IF YOU
AND YOUR MEN DIE IN THE
ATTEMPT! DO YOU UNDERSTAND?

IT WILL TAKE MANY MEN. I CAN
GET GIRDERS ACROSS, BUT THE
PIER WILL HAVE TO BE
REBUILT. WITH A HUNDRED
MEN WE MIGHT DO IT.



EVERY AVAILABLE SOLDIER WAS MUSTERED ON PARADE.

ROUND UP EVERY
LAZY ITALIAN DOG
YOU CAN FIND. IF
ANY REFUSE, SHOOT
THEM! NOW MOVE,
MOVE!



The Bridge of Verano

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A QUARTER OF A MILE FROM THE BRIDGE LAY THE LITTLE TOWN OF ROVENNA. SYSTEMATICALLY, THE GERMANS SEARCHED THE STREETS, RUTHLESSLY EJECTING THE OCCUPANTS FROM EACH HOUSE.



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HERDED LIKE SHEEP, THE ITALIANS WERE DRIVEN TO THE BRIDGE. THERE, THEY WERE FORCED TO DRAG THE GREAT STONES BACK INTO PLACE.



IT WAS BACK-BREAKING WORK — AND THE OLD MAN WAS SLOW. MERCILESSLY, DESSAUR'S RAWHIDE WHIP SLASHED AT HIM...



IT WAS THEN THAT MICHAEL TOLLANI MOVED — WITH THE SPEED OF A PANTHER FOR ALL HIS MUSCULAR SIZE.



DESSAUR'S ABRUPT YELL OF PAIN BROUGHT HIS MEN RUNNING . . .

ACHTUNG! SEIZE
HIM! THE DOG
SHALL PAY FOR
THIS.



THE FIGHT WAS SHORT AND VIOLENT, BUT MICHAEL TOLLANI COULD NOT WITHSTAND THEIR VENGEFUL BRUTALITY FOR LONG.

SIX MONTHS AGO
I'D HAVE WIPE YOU
SCUM OFF THE FACE
OF THE EARTH
FOR THIS!



Chapter 2. *The Sergeant*

SIX MONTHS AGO... SERGEANT MIKE TOLLANI HAD BEEN RIGHT ON THE HEELS OF HIS PLATOON COMMANDER AS THEY STORMED ASHORE WITH THE EIGHTH ARMY...



IT WAS A STRANGE HOMECOMING FOR THE RUGGED SERGEANT. BORN OF ITALIAN PARENTS IN LONDON, HE HAD NOT EXPECTED TO RETURN TO HIS MOTHERLAND BEHIND A SNARLING TOMMY GUN.

FROM OFFSHORE, THE ROYAL NAVY POURED IN A CONTINUAL BOMBARDMENT, BUT THE ASSAULT PARTIES WADED INTO A MURDEROUS CROSSFIRE FROM THE GERMAN REDOUTBS.

JERRY'S GOT A SPANDAU UP OVER THAT RIDGE. WE'LL NEVER MAKE IT WHILE THAT THING'S KNOCKING HELL OUT OF US.



THE MEN WHO CLUNG SO PERILOUSLY TO THAT BLOOD-SOAKED STRIP OF BEACH WERE MEN OF THE SPECIAL AIR SERVICE, HAND-PICKED FIGHTERS.

The Bridge of Verano

17

FROM HIS AMMUNITION POUCH THE SERGEANT DREW A SINISTER BLACK EGG—
A PHOSPHORUS BOMB . . .

COVER
ME IN,
MEN!



AS THE ACRID PHOSPHORUS SMOKE OBSCURED THE GERMANS' VISION,
TOLLANI WAS ON HIS FEET AND GOING LIKE MAD. BEFORE A STARTLED
GERMAN MACHINE-GUNNER COULD SNATCH THE TRIGGER, THE SERGEANT
HAD HURLED A SECOND GRENADE . . .

AIEEE!



The Bridge of Verano

THE DAZED SURVIVORS STOOD NO CHANCE AGAINST THE SERGEANT'S CLOSE-QUARTER ATTACK ...



THEN, WITH A VETERAN'S INSTINCT, HE SENSED THE IMMINENCE OF DEATH AT HIS BACK, AND TURNED TO MEET IT ...

THE GERMAN BAYONET MISSED BY AN INCH AS MIKE TOLLANI FLUNG HIMSELF TO ONE SIDE. THEN HE STRUCK BACK ...



The Bridge of Verano

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THE BLAZING GUNS OF THE S.A.S. MEN REAPED A GRIM HARVEST AS THEY SWARMED OVER THE RIDGE. WITHIN MINUTES, THE GERMAN POSITION WAS WIPE OUT.

NICE GOING, SERGEANT.
YOU'LL GET A MENTION
IN DESPATCHES
FOR THIS.

NO NEED FOR THAT,
SKIPPER, IT WAS ONLY
... LOOK OUT!



THE WARNING CAME TOO LATE. THE LAST VENOMOUS GESTURE OF A FANATICAL NAZI FOUND A TARGET...



The Bridge of Verano

THE WOUND WAS NOT FATAL, BUT FOR LIEUTENANT PETER CORRIGAN THE WAR WAS OVER. A COMBAT TEAM THAT HAD BEEN TOGETHER SINCE EL ALAMEIN WAS BROKEN UP.



THE TOUGH SERGEANT FELT A DEEP SENSE OF LOSS AS HE WATCHED THE STRETCHER BEING GENTLY BORNE AWAY. THEN A ROUGH BUT SINCERE VOICE INTERRUPTED HIS REVERIE.



The Bridge of Verano

21

MIKE TOLLANI TURNED SLOWLY, HIS SHOULDERS STRAIGHTENED AND THERE WAS A GRIM AFFECTION IN HIS VOICE WHEN HE SPOKE . . .

ALL RIGHT, LADS, TAKE A BREATHER — THEN WE'LL PUSH ON AND GIVE JERRY ANOTHER BLOODY NOSE.



IN THE BREAK-THROUGH OF THE GUSTAV LINE, THE PLATOON FOLLOWED SERGEANT TOLLANI INTO THE MAW OF THE GERMAN GUNS. THE INFERNO THAT WAS CASSINO SERVED ONLY TO STRENGTHEN THE BOND BETWEEN THEM . . .

I... I CAN'T
STAND IT . . .
I'M GETTING
OUT!

STEADY,
LAD . . .
STEADY!



The Bridge of Verano

HE WAS TOO OLD A HAND TO CONDEMN A MAN WHOSE NERVE HAD FALTERED, ESPECIALLY HIS MEN, WHO HAD WITHSTOOD THE WEEKS AND MONTHS OF UNRELENTING STRAIN . . .

TAKE IT EASY, KID,
WE'VE BEEN IN TIGHTER
SPOTS THAN THIS. JUST
STICK CLOSE BEHIND ME
AND YOU'LL BE ALL
RIGHT.



AT THE END OF THAT EPIC BATTLE THERE WERE MANY GAPS IN THE RANKS. OF THE ORIGINAL THIRTY-FIVE MEN WHO HAD STORMED THE ITALIAN COAST, ONLY TWENTY WERE LEFT TO ANSWER THE ROLL CALL.



The Bridge of Verano

23

TWO DAYS LATER, THE PLATOON WAS PULLED OUT OF THE LINE FOR A WELL-EARNED REST.

COR!
THIS IS A
BIT OF ALL
RIGHT!

IT'S NOT
THE RITZ, LADS;
BUT AT LEAST WE
CAN KIP DOWN IN
THE DRY.

C.O. WANTS
YOU, AT THE
DOUBLE, SARGE.



MIKE TOLLANI REPORTED TO HIS COMMANDING OFFICER, COLONEL STEEL.

SERGEANT TOLLANI,
NUMBER THREE
PLATOON, 'D' COMPANY,
SIR.

YOU'VE DONE STERLING WORK,
SERGEANT. YOU'VE BEEN AWARDED
THE M.M. MY CONGRATULATIONS, YOU
DESERVE IT. YOU'LL ALSO BE PLEASED
TO KNOW THAT YOU HAVE A
NEW PLATOON COMMANDER
AT LONG LAST.



The Bridge of Verano

THE SERGEANT STIFFENED UNCONSCIOUSLY...

LIEUTENANT CARTER, SERGEANT. HE JOINS US FROM DEPOT, SO I'LL LOOK TO YOU TO SHOW HIM THE ROPES FOR A WHILE.



FOR A MOMENT, HOSTILITY SHOWED IN TOLLANI'S EYES AND THE YOUNG LIEUTENANT WAS QUICK TO NOTICE IT.

AS THEY LEFT THE HEADQUARTERS, THE LIEUTENANT'S FIRST WORDS DID LITTLE TO CREATE A BETTER IMPRESSION...

FROM THE LITTLE I'VE SEEN OF THE MEN, SERGEANT, IT'S TIME SOMEBODY SMARTENED THEM UP A BIT!



... AND HIS MEETING WITH THE PLATOON WAS NO MORE SUCCESSFUL.

I UNDERSTAND YOU MEN HAVE BEEN HAVING A FAIRLY ROUGH TIME, WHICH SOMEWHAT EXCUSES YOUR DEPLORABLE TURNOUT. HOWEVER, I EXPECT...

FAIRLY ROUGH TIME! YOU DON'T KNOW THE 'ALF OF IT, MATE.

SILENCE IN THE RANKS THERE!



WE'VE COPPED A
RIGHT ONE THIS
TIME.

OLD SARGE TOLLY DON'T
THINK MUCH TO HIM - YOU
CAN SEE THAT.

LESS 'O
THAT CHAT,
YOU TWO.



A FEW DAYS LATER, THE UNIT WAS HEADING TOWARDS THE FRONT AGAIN ...



THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE TWO MEN HAD NOT IMPROVED, AND THEY
DROVE IN A SULLEN SILENCE.

The Bridge of Verano

TROUBLE HIT FAST AND WITHOUT WARNING. A LONE ME-109 CAME SNARLING OUT OF THE SUN, ITS GUNS RAKING THE CONVOY...



THE JEEP CAREERED OFF THE ROAD INTO A DITCH. BUT THE SERGEANT'S QUICK REACTIONS HAD SAVED THEM...

I COULD HAVE GOT A BURST IN AT JERRY IF YOU HADN'T PANICKED, SERGEANT.

TAKE A DEKKO AT THE ROAD, LIEUTENANT...



UGLY RED SPOTS BURNED ON THE SERGEANT'S FACE AND IT WAS LONG SECONDS BEFORE HE COULD TRUST HIMSELF TO SPEAK.

WE'D HAVE BEEN DEAD DUCKS IF I HADN'T DITCHED THE JEEP. RIGHT NOW, THERE'S WOUNDED MEN NEEDING HELP...



THE REMAINDER OF THE JOURNEY PASSED WITHOUT FURTHER INCIDENT. BY NIGHTFALL, THEY HAD REACHED THE AREA BEHIND THE FRONT LINE.

THE BRIGADIER WANTS TO SEE YOU, SIR. TAC. H.Q. IS THREE HUNDRED YARDS UP THE ROAD TO THE LEFT, YOU CAN'T MISS IT.



The Bridge of Verano

BY THE FLICKERING LIGHT OF A HURRICANE LAMP THEY MET THE BRIGADE COMMANDER. THE UNCERTAIN LIGHT ACCENTUATED THE DEEP LINES OF EXHAUSTION ETCHED ON HIS FACE.

SORRY I CAN'T GIVE YOU TIME TO SETTLE IN, BUT JERRY'S MOVING ABOUT AND WE'VE GOT TO FIND WHAT'S DOING. I WANT YOU TO TAKE A RECCE PATROL OUT...



IT WAS A GOOD NIGHT FOR A PATROL. A LIGHT WIND SENT DARK CLOUDS SCUDDING ACROSS THE FACE OF THE MOON. A NIGHT OF DANCING SHADOWS WHERE MEN COULD MOVE UNSEEN...

WHAT THE DEVIL ARE YOU HANGING ABOUT FOR, SERGEANT? LET'S GET GOING.

ONE BIT OF LOOSE EQUIPMENT THAT CHINKS AT THE WRONG MOMENT CAN BE FATAL, SIR. IT'S WORTH CHECKING!



CARTER KNEW IT WAS A POINT HE SHOULD HAVE REMEMBERED HIMSELF, AND THE SARCASM IN THE SERGEANT'S VOICE STUNG.

FOR AN HOUR THEY MOVED SLOWLY AND CAUTIOUSLY THROUGH THE HOSTILE DARKNESS. THEN, FAINTLY ON THE WIND, CAME THE SOUND OF GUTTURAL VOICES.

THEY'RE UP TO SOMETHING IN THAT LINE OF WOODS ACROSS THE HILL THERE.

I'LL TAKE A SHUFTI, SIR! I WON'T BE LONG.



FURIOUSLY, THE LIEUTENANT HISSED A PROTEST, BUT THE SERGEANT HAD ALREADY MELTED INTO THE DARKNESS.

SERGEANT, COME BACK HERE! I'LL...

NOT TO WORRY, SIR. THE SARGE KNOWS WHAT HE'S DOING.



THE VETERAN SERGEANT HAD PLAYED THE SAME DEADLY GAME OF HIDE AND SEEK MANY TIMES BEFORE. THREE HUNDRED YARDS ON, THE WOODS YIELDED THEIR GRIM SECRET TO HIM.

EIGHTY-EIGHTS! SO THAT'S THE GAME! THOSE GUNS COULD RIP OUR ARMOUR APART BEFORE THEY KNEW WHAT HIT 'EM.



The Bridge of Verano

STILL UNSEEN, HE MADE HIS WAY BACK TO THE WAITING PATROL AND QUICKLY OUTLINED THE SITUATION TO THE IRATE LIEUTENANT.



SUDDENLY THE CRUNCHING OF GRAVEL BROKE THE STILL NIGHT AIR ...

THEY WAITED TENSELY AS A BURLY STEEL-HELMETED FIGURE TURNED TOWARDS THEM ...



AT THE SERGEANT'S WORDS, THE VETERANS OF THE PATROL SLIPPED INTO THE SHADOWS.

THE LIEUTENANT WAS IGNOMINIOUSLY THRUST TO THE GROUND WITH THE SERGEANT'S MASSIVE HAND BETWEEN HIS SHOULDER BLADES . . .

ONE SHOT AND THE
BALLOON WILL GO UP.
NOW, PLAY DEAD, SIR—
DON'T MOVE A
MUSCLE! YOUR
LIFE DEPENDS
ON IT!

BEFORE THE STARTLED OFFICER COULD REPLY, TOLLANI, TOO, HAD DISAPPEARED AND HE WAS ALONE.

HIMMEL!
WHAT IS
THIS?

The Bridge of Verano

THE GERMAN BENT TO EXAMINE THE PROSTRATE FIGURE AND, FOR A BRIEF MOMENT, THE NAPE OF HIS NECK SHOWED WHITE BEHIND HIS HELMET. THE SERGEANT'S HAND SLICED DOWN...



THERE HAD BEEN NO SOUND. UNSTEADILY, THE LIEUTENANT ROSE TO HIS FEET. HIS VOICE WAS ICE-COLD.



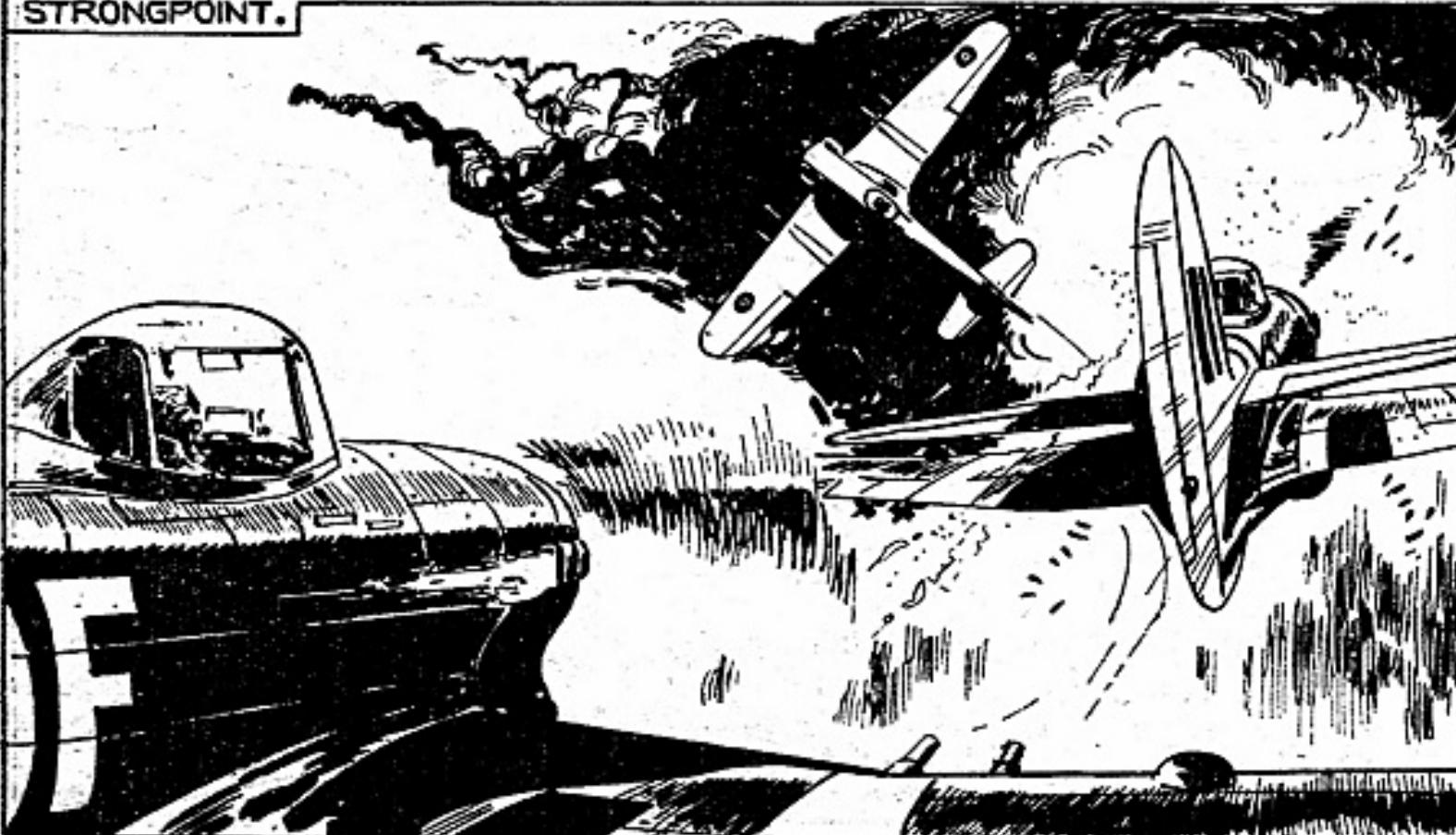
AN HOUR LATER, THE PATROL HAD GAINED THE SAFETY OF THEIR OWN LINES. LIEUTENANT CARTER'S FACE WAS BITTER AS HE REPORTED TO THE INTELLIGENCE OFFICER.

YOU'VE DONE WELL ON YOUR FIRST PATROL. THIS BEAUTY WILL PROBABLY TALK—AND WE'LL WARM THINGS UP FOR JERRY IN THE WOODS.

DON'T THANK ME,
I JUST WENT FOR THE
WALK. IT WAS THE
SERGEANT'S SHOW,
ALL THE WAY.



THE PATROL PAID OFF. ROCKET-FIRING TYPHOONS SHRIEKED OUT OF THE DAWN SKY, TURNING THEIR BLUNT NOSES DOWN TOWARDS THE ENEMY STRONGPOINT.



The Bridge of Verano

WITHIN THREE MINUTES, THE WOOD BECAME A HIDEOUS SCAR ON THE LANDSCAPE AND THE MENACING GERMAN GUNS A SHATTERED MASS OF TWISTED STEEL.



THE S.A.S. ASSAULT PLATOON HAD BEEN ORDERED TO LEAD THE BRIGADE ADVANCE AND HIT AT ANY FURTHER STRONGPOINTS THAT BARRED THE WAY.

RIGHT, MEN —
WHEN WE MEET THE
ENEMY, WE HIT 'EM
HARD AND FAST!
LET'S GO!



THE JEEPS SOON OUTDISTANCED THE INFANTRY SLOGGING UP THE HILL, AND AS THEY BREASTED THE RISE, THE SERGEANT BROUGHT THE VEHICLE TO A HALT.

NOT A SIGN OF JERRY ANYWHERE. THEY MUST HAVE LEFT THAT ONE EMPLACEMENT IN THE WOODS TO HOLD US UP WHILE THEY GOT TO HELL OUT OF IT.

SO IT SEEMS,
SERGEANT! LET'S
GET AFTER
THEM!



THEY DROVE DOWN INTO A VALLEY OF UNCANNY SILENCE. IMPATIENTLY, CARTER URGED THE SERGEANT TO DRIVE FASTER . . .

THIS ISN'T A
FUNERAL, SERGEANT.
GET A MOVE ON!

JERRY IS FOND OF LEAVING
LITTLE KEEPSAKES BEHIND —
LIKE MINES, FOR INSTANCE.
WE'LL GET THERE, SIR, ALL
IN GOOD TIME — AND IN
ONE PIECE!



The Bridge of Verano

STILL THERE WAS NO VICIOUS BURST OF MACHINE-GUN FIRE AND AFTER SEVERAL MILES, THEY PULLED INTO A SMALL DESERTED HAMLET. THERE, THE LIEUTENANT CALLED A HALT...



THERE WAS SOMETHING SINISTER IN THE BROODING SILENCE THAT HUNG OVER THE EMPTY VILLAGE. WARILY, THE MEN SET ABOUT THEIR SEARCH.



FOR THE MOMENT, THE TWO MEN FORGOT THEIR DIFFERENCES. FROM AN UPSTAIRS WINDOW OF THE HOUSE, A GRIM VIEW CONFRONTED THEM . . .

LOOK, SIR.
JERRIES! IT'S CRAWLING WITH 'EM OUT THERE AND THEY'RE HEADING THIS WAY.

IT'S A COUNTER ATTACK! WE'VE STILL GOT TIME TO GET OUT BEFORE THEY OVERRUN US. I'LL ASSEMBLE THE PLATOON, SIR.



BUT THE LIEUTENANT'S ORDER STOPPED THE SERGEANT IN HIS TRACKS.

WE ARE NOT RUNNING. WE STAY AND FIGHT!

HAVE YOU GONE LOCO? IT WON'T BE A FIGHT, IT'LL BE A MASSACRE!



WITHOUT ANOTHER WORD, LIEUTENANT CARTER RAN DOWN INTO THE STREET . . .

WE'RE SURE IN A TIGHT SPOT THIS TIME, SARGE.

WE'VE FOUGHT TOO LONG AND COME TOO FAR FOR IT TO END LIKE THIS.



A COLD CHILL OF FEAR CREEP ROUND THE SERGEANT'S HEART AS HE SAW THE PLATOON HE HAD NURSED THROUGH MONTHS OF BITTER FIGHTING, ABOUT TO MAKE A LAST STAND.

The Bridge of Verano

THE SLIM BARRELS OF THE BRENS LOOKED PATHETICALLY INADEQUATE AS THEY POINTED TOWARD THE MASSIVE JUGGERNAUTS THAT WERE REMORSELESSLY CLOSING ON THEM.

SIR, FOR HEAVENS' SAKE,
WHILE THERE'S STILL A CHANCE,

NO, SERGEANT.
I'VE SENT A DON R.
BACK FOR A RELIEF FORCE. WE'LL HOLD 'EM OFF TILL HELP ARRIVES.

CE

L'UNITA



THE BRENS HAMMERED DEFIANTLY. BUT THE LONG BURSTS OF .303 AMMUNITION GLANCED HARMLESSLY OFF THE ARMOURED STEEL.

TEUFEL! WHO ARE THE STUPID FOOLS WHO DARE ATTACK OUR PANZERS WITH SMALL ARMS FIRE? LOAD H.E. — THREE ROUNDS — FIRE!



The Bridge of Verano

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THE SALVO OF H.E. SHELLS SMASHED HOME AND THROUGH THE SWIRLING SMOKE, SERGEANT TOLLANI SAW HIS COMRADES DIE. HE TURNED SAVAGELY ON THE LIEUTENANT...

ARE YOU SATISFIED NOW? THERE WON'T BE A MAN LEFT ALIVE IN A FEW MINUTES.

GET MORE MEN UP TO THIS GUN, SERGEANT... DO YOU HEAR...



INSIDE THE SERGEANT, SOMETHING SNAPPED. THE LIEUTENANT NEVER SAW THE IRON-HARD FIST THAT CRASHED HOME ON HIS JAW.

YOU FOOL!



The Bridge of Verano.

THERE WAS ONLY ONE THOUGHT IN THE SERGEANT'S MIND. THE PLATOON MUST BE SAVED, EVEN IF HE HAD TO DIE FOR IT.

CORPORAL, TAKE THE LIEUTENANT AND GET THE PLATOON IN THE JEEPS. HEAD FOR OUR LINES. I'LL STALL 'EM OFF AS LONG AS I CAN.

BUT HECK, SARGE...

THAT'S AN ORDER, MAN... GET MOVING!



COOLLY, MIKE TOLLANI SLID A MAGAZINE ON TO THE BOY'S ANTI-TANK RIFLE. BEHIND HIM, MEN CLAWED THEIR WAY OUT OF THE HOUSES AND RACED FOR THE JEEPS.

IT HAD TO BE THIS WAY, LIEUTENANT. I ONLY HOPE YOU'VE LEARNT YOUR LESSON?



THE LEADING TANK WAS LESS THAN FIFTY YARDS AWAY WHEN TOLLANI FIRED AND FELT THE VICIOUS SMACK OF THE GUN AGAINST HIS SHOULDER. HE WAS DEAD ON TARGET.



WITH THE UNEXPECTED LOSS OF THEIR COMMANDER, THE PANZER SQUADRON WAS MOMENTARILY THROWN INTO CONFUSION. THEN THEY OPENED UP AT POINT-BLANK RANGE ON THE SERGEANT'S POSITION...

ACHTUNG!
THE DOGS
ESCAPE!



The Bridge of Verano

THERE COULD BE ONLY ONE ENDING. THE LION-HEARTED SERGEANT WAS STILL PUMPING SHELLS FROM THE BOYES WHEN THE BUILDING BESIDE HIM COLLAPSED.



AS BLACK OBLIVION CLOSED IN ABOUT HIM, A GRIM SMILE CROSSED HIS PAIN-RACKED FACE. HIS PLATOON HAD ESCAPED . . .

ANXIOUS TO KEEP UP WITH THEIR ADVANCING FORMATIONS, THE PANZERS DID NOT STOP TO SEARCH THE SHATTERED VILLAGE.



HIMMEL! THEY HAVE
ESCAPED! PANZER TWO,
PANZER THREE, DISENGAGE
FROM ACTION AND
REFORM.

The Bridge of Verano

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IT WAS THE FOLLOWING MORNING WHEN ITALIAN PEASANTS CAUTIOUSLY RETURNED TO THEIR STRICKEN VILLAGE.



THE ITALIANS GENTLY EASED THE SERGEANT FROM THE DEBRIS. HIS EYES FLUTTERED OPEN — AND HE WHISPERED A FEW WORDS — IN ITALIAN.



The Bridge of Verano

THEY MOISTENED HIS LIPS AND HE REVIVED SOMEWHAT AS THEY LIFTED HIM ON TO A ROUGH STRETCHER.



HE WAS TAKEN TO A VILLAGE FAR FROM THE BATTLEFIELD. THERE, AMONG HIS NEW-FOUND FRIENDS, HE WAS WELL CARED FOR.



TOLLANI KNEW THE PENALTY FOR STRIKING AN OFFICER AND DISOBEDIING AN ORDER IN THE FACE OF THE ENEMY. THERE WOULD BE NO GOING BACK.

IN THE DAYS THAT FOLLOWED, MIKE FOUND PEACE AND CONTENTMENT IN THE SIMPLE VILLAGE LIFE.



BUT THREE WEEKS LATER, THE HAPPY ILLUSION OF PEACE WAS RUDELY SHATTERED. LATE ONE EVENING, HEAVY JACKBOOTS GROUNDED ON THE COBBLES OUTSIDE THE COTTAGE, AND A RIFLE BUTT CRASHED AGAINST THE DOOR.



SO IT WAS THAT MIKE TOLLANI CAME TO THE BRIDGE OF VERANO . . .

Chapter 3. Fighting Force

THE LOSS OF THEIR SERGEANT HAD BEEN A BITTER BLOW TO NO. 3 PLATOON, BUT THERE WAS STILL A WAR TO FIGHT. TWO DAYS LATER, THEY WERE GLIDER-BORNE OVER ENEMY-HELD TERRITORY.

WE TOUCH DOWN IN FIVE MINUTES. OUR JOB IS TO CUT THE ENEMY LINES OF COMMUNICATION.

I'D BE A DARNED SIGHT HAPPIER IF WE HAD THE SARGE, AND NOT THAT TEXT BOOK HERO LEADING US.

YOU CAN SAY THAT AGAIN, MATE.



THE MISSION WAS DOOMED TO FAILURE BEFORE THE FIRST GLIDER WAS AIRBORNE, FOR AT THE LANDING ZONE THE GERMANS WERE WAITING . . .

SO THEY COME — AND DEAD ON TIME!
OPEN FIRE!



IT WAS NOT THE YOUNG LIEUTENANT'S FAULT THERE HAD BEEN A SECURITY LEAK, BUT THE MEN OF HIS PLATOON BLAMED HIM JUST THE SAME.



PINNED DOWN BY THE DEADLY CROSSFIRE OF THE SPANDAU'S THERE SEEMED LITTLE HOPE FOR THE SMALL BRITISH FORCE. THEN, MERCIFULLY, THE MOON SLID BEHIND A BANK OF CLOUD.



The Bridge of Verano

UNDER COVER OF THE BRIEF DARKNESS, THEY GAVE THE GERMANS THE SLIP. MIRACULOUSLY, THEIR CASUALTIES WERE LIGHT, BUT MORALE WAS AT A LOW EBB...



FOR INTERMINABLE HOURS THEY STRUGGLED ACROSS THE ROUGH, DESOLATE COUNTRY. THEN, IN THE FIRST FAINT FLUSH OF DAWN THEY SIGHTED A CONVOY. THERE WAS RELIEF IN CARTER'S VOICE AS HE RAN FORWARD.



The Bridge of Verano

49

IN THE UNCERTAIN LIGHT, THE LIEUTENANT HAD MADE A GHASTLY MISTAKE. HIS WARNING CRY WAS DROWNED IN THE RAUCOUS CLAMOUR OF SMALL ARMS FIRE.

GOOD GRIEF!
GERMANS! GET
UNDER COVER!



YOU WOULDN'T CREDIT IT.
HE'S LED US STRAIGHT OUT O'
THE FRYING PAN INTO THE
BLOOMIN' FIRE.

SAVE YOUR BREATH,
CHUM, AND KEEP THEM
MAGS COMING. THEY'RE
GOING TO RUSH US ANY
MOMENT NOW.

THE LIEUTENANT HAD BROUGHT DOWN THE SAVAGE AGGRESSION OF MOTORIZED GERMAN INFANTRY UPON HIS UNFORTUNATE PLATOON. FOR THE SECOND TIME THAT NIGHT, THEY FACED HOPELESSLY LONG ODDS.

50 The Bridge of Verano

WHILE THE S.A.S. MEN PREPARED TO SELL THEIR LIVES DEARLY, A QUARTER OF A MILE AWAY, A BRITISH PATROL FROM A HUSSAR REGIMENT WAS MAKING ITS WAY BACK TO BASE.



INTENT ON THE DESTRUCTION OF THE SMALL BRITISH FORCE, THE GERMANS REMAINED UNAWARE OF THE THREAT THAT SWEPT OUT OF THE SHADOWS, UNTIL IT WAS TOO LATE.



The Bridge of Verano

51

TAKEN BY SURPRISE, PANIC SEIZED THE GERMANS. LEAVING THEIR WOUNDED BEHIND THEM, THEY BEAT A FRANTIC RETREAT.

I'VE NEVER BEEN SO PLEASED TO SEE ANYONE. I DIDN'T GIVE MUCH FOR OUR CHANCES A FEW MINUTES AGO.



IT WAS A WEARY AND DISPIRITED PLATOON THAT AT LAST LIMPED INTO THE SAFETY OF THEIR OWN LINES.

THAT TWO PIP JOKER'S GOING TO BE THE DEATH O' THE LOT OF US AFORE HE'S FINISHED.

HE COULDN'T HOLD A CANDLE TO THE OLD SARGE WHEN IT COMES TO A SCRAP.



The Bridge of Verano

DESPITE HIS MANY SHORTCOMINGS, CARTER HAD MADE AN HONEST ATTEMPT TO MAKE GOOD. PERHAPS HE HAD TRIED TOO HARD. AN HOUR LATER, HE STOOD BEFORE HIS COMMANDING OFFICER . . .

WHAT IS IT, CARTER?

I...I WISH TO BE RELIEVED OF MY COMMAND, SIR. I DON'T MEASURE UP TO THE STANDARDS OF THIS UNIT. IT...IT'S NOT FAIR TO THE MEN.



THE C.O. LOOKED UP AT THE ANXIOUS WHITE FACE OF THE YOUNG MAN BEFORE HIM AND THERE WAS QUIET UNDERSTANDING IN HIS VOICE.

I THINK I'M THE BEST JUDGE OF THAT. IF I SEND YOU BACK TO BASE NOW, CARTER, YOU'LL BE RUNNING AWAY FROM YOURSELF—AND YOU'LL KEEP ON RUNNING THE REST OF YOUR LIFE.



IT SO HAPPENS WE'VE A SPECIALY IMPORTANT JOB ON OUR HANDS, AND YOURS IS THE ONLY PLATOON I CAN SPARE. YOU'RE GOING TO LEAD YOUR MEN, CARTER, AND YOU'RE GOING TO PULL IT OFF!



The Bridge of Verano

53

THE YOUNG OFFICER HAD THE REMAINDER OF THE DAY TO REFLECT ON THE WORDS OF HIS COMMANDING OFFICER. THAT NIGHT, AS HE BRIEFED HIS MEN, THERE WAS A NEW FIRMNESS IN HIS VOICE . . .



IT WAS AT FIRST LIGHT, THE FOLLOWING MORNING, THAT THE PLATOON LAY CONCEALED ABOVE THE BRIDGE OF VERANO. THEY WATCHED AS THE LAST OF THE GERMAN ARMOUR RUMBLED SLOWLY ACROSS.



MAJOR DESSAUR WAS IN HIGH GOOD HUMOUR.

LAST UNITS ACROSS,
HERR MAJOR.

EXCELLENT!
NOW WE WILL ENJOY
OURSELVES A MOMENT
BEFORE WE BLOW THE
BRIDGE. BRING OUT
THE PRISONER AND
PARADE A FIRING
SQUAD.



THE SADISTIC MAJOR WATCHED THE PREPARATIONS FOR THE EXECUTION OF MIKE TOLLANI WITH RELISH.

MARK WELL,
YOU ITALIAN DOGS.
SO DIE ALL ENEMIES OF
THE THIRD REICH!

N LIBER



BUT, HIGH ON THE HILLSIDE, THERE WERE OTHER SPECTATORS TO THE GRIM SCENE...

THE SWINES! THEY'RE GOING TO BUTCHER SOME POOR DEVIL. MORTAR SECTION, COVER US! THE REST, INTO THE JEEPS, WE'RE GOING TO BREAK UP THAT PARTY.



THE FIRST WORDS OF COMMAND WERE ON THE NAZI OFFICER'S LIPS... WHEN...

HIMMEL! AN ATTACK!

FIRING PARTY, PRESENT, AIM...



QUICK, MY FRIEND, NOW'S OUR CHANCE. LET US MAKE FOR THE HILLS.



The Bridge of Verano

THEN CARTER AND HIS MEN STORMED OVER THE BRIDGE IN THEIR JEEPS,
GUNS FLAMING ...



THE SHOCK ATTACK WON THE BRITISH THEIR OBJECTIVE, BUT THE S. S. MEN
WERE QUICK TO RALLY ...





WHILE THE FIGHT RAGED WITH UNABATED FURY BEHIND THEM, THE ITALIANS CLIMBED STEADILY INTO THE HILLS. BUT MIKE TOLLANI'S STEPS WERE RELUCTANT AND WHEN HE REACHED THE CREST, HE TURNED.



The Bridge of Verano

THE TEMPTATION TO ESCAPE WITH HIS FRIENDS WAS STRONG. BUT DOWN THERE OLD COMRADES WERE FIGHTING DESPERATELY FOR THEIR LIVES.

IF YOU GO BACK NOW
THEY WILL ARREST YOU AS
A DESERTER.

SO BE IT - BUT
I CANNOT LEAVE THEM
NOW. WILL YOU NOT HELP
ME TO STRIKE ONE BLOW
AT THE GERMAN DOGS WHO
HAVE TORN YOU FROM
YOUR HOMES?



ONCE AGAIN, MIKE FOUND HIMSELF IN CHARGE OF A FIGHTING FORCE, BUT THIS TIME THEY HAD LITTLE EXCEPT THEIR BARE HANDS WITH WHICH TO FIGHT. IT WAS ENOUGH...

WAIT FOR IT, LADS!
HERE THEY COME...
ALL TOGETHER —
HEAVE!



The Bridge of Verano

59

THE FACE OF THE GERMAN IN THE LEADING TANK BECAME A MASK OF HORROR AS HE SAW THE AVALANCHE OF BOULDERS THAT SWEPT DOWN THE HILL WITH EVER INCREASING FURY...



EVEN THE MASSIVE ARMOUR OF THE PANZER COULD NOT WITHSTAND THAT HAIL OF ROCK. THE PANZER WAS WRECKED — THE ROAD TO THE BRIDGE EFFECTIVELY BLOCKED.

NOW I MUST GO TO REJOIN MY COUNTRYMEN — ONE DAY, WHEN THIS IS ALL OVER, I SHALL RETURN, MY FRIENDS.

IT IS GOOD, MICHAEL — UNTIL THAT DAY!



The Bridge of Verano

AT THE BRIDGE, CARL DESSAUR SAW HIS CAREFULLY LAID PLANS AND HIS DREAMS OF GLORY CRUMBLING AROUND HIM.

HERR MAJOR,
OUR PANZERS
HAVE BEEN
AMBUSHED!

TEUFEL! WE MUST
TAKE THE BRIDGE OURSELVES.
IT MUST BE DESTROYED,
D'YOU HEAR?

DESSAUR FLUNG HIS REMAINING TROOPS FORWARD IN A LAST FANATICAL CHARGE.

FORWARD, MEN!
DRIVE THE ACCURSED
BRITISH BACK. FIGHT
FOR YOUR FATHERLAND.
FORWARD!

The Bridge of Verano

61

THEIR AMMUNITION RUNNING LOW, THE S.A.S. PLATOON WAS FORCED BACK ACROSS THE BRIDGE BY THE FURY OF THE GERMAN ATTACK.



THERE WAS ONE LAST CARD THE S.S. MAJOR COULD PLAY. SKIRTING THE FURIOUS MELEE, HE RACED TO THE SMALL STONE BUILDING WHERE THE DETONATION GEAR WAS PLACED. BUT THERE, THE ENGINEER OFFICER FACED HIM IN FIERCE PROTEST . . .



The Bridge of Verano

DESSAUR'S FINGER TIGHTENED ON THE TRIGGER OF HIS LUGER—BUT THE SHOT THAT CRACKED DEAFENINGLY IN THE ENCLOSED SPACE CAME FROM THE DOORWAY.

IT'S YOUR TURN NOW, MAJOR.

AAAGH!



AT POINT-BLANK RANGE, TOLLANI COULD NOT MISS. THE S.S. KILLER DIED AND THE BRIDGE WAS SAVED.

WITH THE END OF THEIR BRUTAL DRIVING FORCE, THE GERMAN ATTACK SPENT ITSELF. THE FIRING DIED AND THE ACRID CORDITE FUMES ROLLED AWAY. AS THE S.A.S. MEN MOVED CAUTIOUSLY FORWARD, THEY WERE MET BY A MAN WHO WALKED ALONE . . .

BY ALL THE STARS!
AM I SEEING A
GHOST, LADS, OR
IS THAT OLD
TOLLY?

HEY, LOOK!
IT'S THE
SERGEANT,
LADS!



NEXT MOMENT, MIKE WAS SURROUNDED BY AN EAGER GROUP OF OLD COMRADES. THEN A SUDDEN, TENSE SILENCE FELL AND THE MEN STEPPED BACK AS LIEUTENANT CARTER AND SERGEANT MIKE TOLLANI STOOD FACE TO FACE.



BUT THE "GREEN" OFFICER TOLLANI HAD ONCE KNOWN, NO LONGER EXISTED. LIEUTENANT CARTER HAD WON THE RESPECT OF HIS MEN IN THAT LAST BITTER FIGHT AND WHEN HE SPOKE, HE WON THEIR ADMIRATION AS WELL.



The Bridge of Verano

IT WAS LATER IN THE DAY WHEN THE FIRST UNIT OF THE BRITISH ARMOURED SPEARHEAD CROSSED THE BRIDGE AT VERANO. LIEUTENANT CARTER TURNED TO HIS TROOP SERGEANT . . .

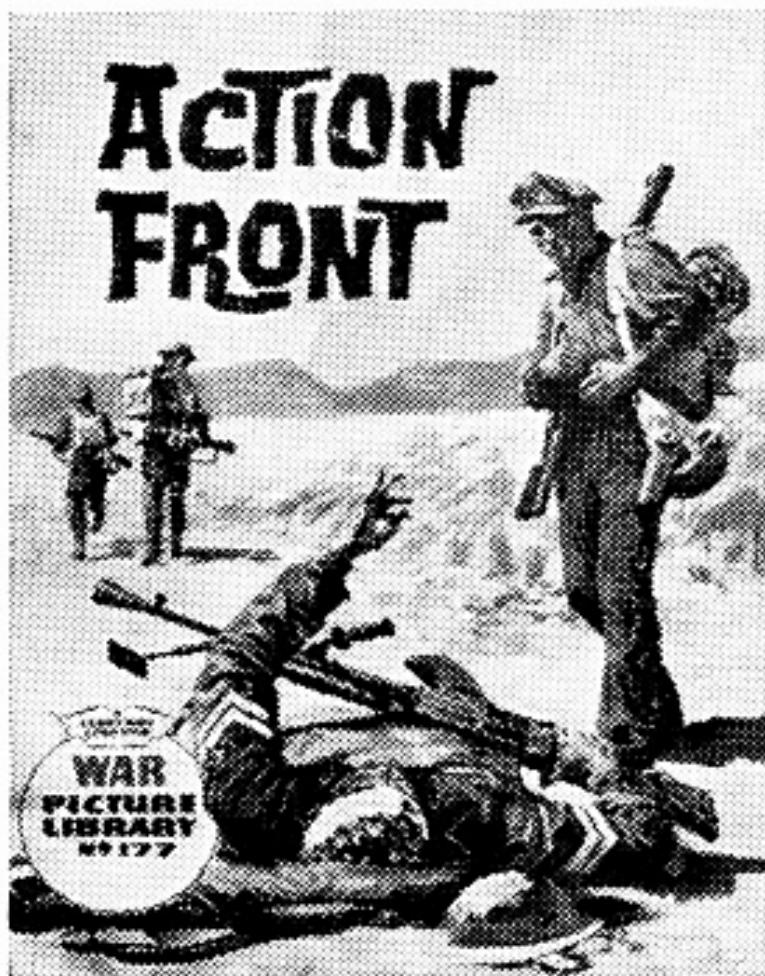


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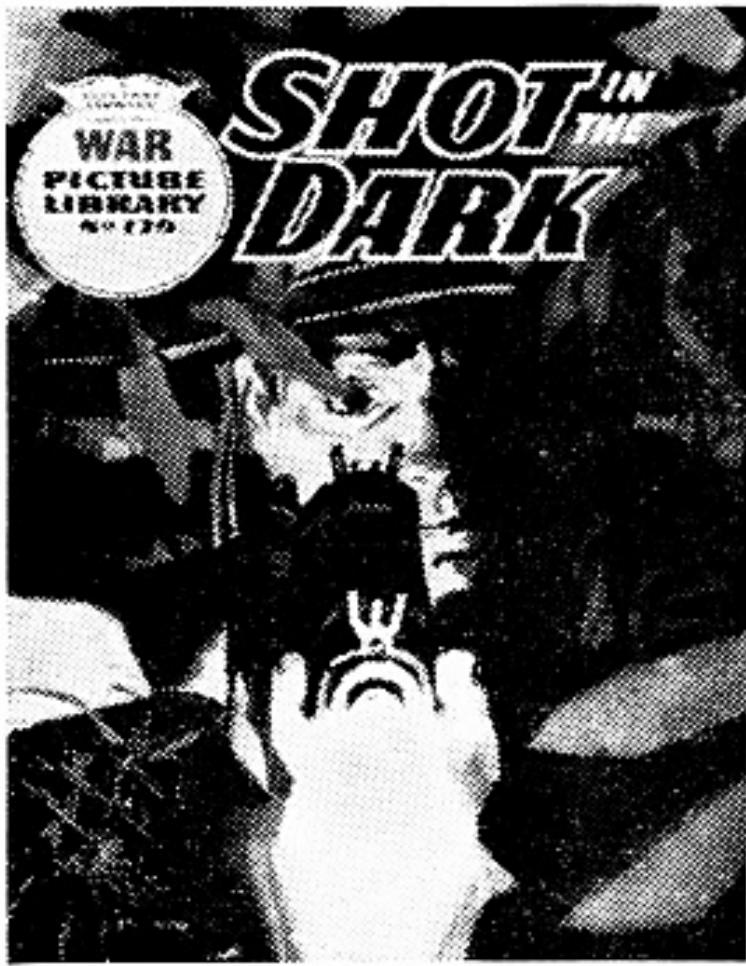
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